

Committee on International Relations, Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights, and International Operations

**Testimony of Dave Peterson
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Prospects for Democracy in Ethiopia and Eritrea

Thanks to the Subcommittee for granting me the honor of testifying this afternoon.

The National Endowment for Democracy has made small grants to support democracy in Ethiopia since 1991, shortly after the fall of the Derg regime. These have included support to human rights organizations, independence press efforts, civic education, the promotion of private enterprise, and women's rights. NED maintains a modest grants program in Ethiopia, but it is a country that has been targeted in our current strategy for expanded programming. So far this year we have made \$312,213 in grants for projects in Ethiopia, and we intend to allocate an additional \$160,000 by the end of year with special funds approved by the Congress. NED's sister organizations, the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute, have been involved in election support activities funded by USAID. Although both Institutes were recently forced to leave, we hope the Ethiopian government will soon reverse its decision. NED has made just one grant in Eritrea more than ten years ago, shortly after that country gained independence. It was for a press project that failed to get off the ground.

Although I do not consider myself an expert on Ethiopia, it is a country we are very concerned about at NED due to its enormous political and strategic importance for the African continent. In terms of the advance of democracy in Africa, progress in Ethiopia is critical. Democratization is certain to have an impact on its neighbors, as well as improving the lives of its own population of more than 70 million, which is the second largest in Africa.

The problem with Ethiopia has long been the ambiguity of the political situation, which sees advances one day and retreats the next, hopeful words followed by disappointing actions. There can be no doubt that Ethiopia is far better off in terms of respect for human rights, political pluralism, free press, and economic policies than it was during the Mengistu era, or that of Haile Selassie, or any other time in its history. Perhaps taking a long view of things would suggest the need for patience; after all, this is a culture that stretches back to Biblical times. It is also a desperately poor country, which always makes the challenge of political development much more difficult.

Nevertheless, in a spirit of friendship, I think it is worthwhile for the United States to continue to press Ethiopia to allow greater openness. I do not think Ethiopia can afford the luxury of taking a lot of time in its democratic development. Nor do I believe that its

poverty should be considered an insuperable obstacle to freedom. On the contrary, our experience in Ethiopia has suggested that its citizens understand and desire democracy, and that many of the country's political and economic problems may be more readily addressed in a more open and democratic system. Because Ethiopia could so easily go either way -- either join the community of democratic nations, or stagnate in a kind of corrupt authoritarianism -- it becomes so important now to invest strategically in the country and tip the balance in the right direction. Democracy is in Ethiopia's own best interest, and the US needs to help.

The May 15 elections will be an important test. Almost six months ago the Endowment hosted a forum at our offices here in Washington that brought together a spokesman from one of our grantees, the Ethiopian Human Rights Council, as well as representatives from the Ethiopian embassy and the government's political opposition. Although there were sharp points of disagreement, the meeting was heartening because both sides were able to talk to each other with reasonable civility. The government insisted on its commitment to political and electoral reform, and the opposition expressed its willingness to participate in the process in a peaceful way.

Since then, certain reforms demanded by the opposition have been implemented, although not all. Opposition political party members, especially those outside of Addis, are still subject to harassment. Despite promises for several years, Ethiopia still does not allow private radio. Although a few years ago, Ethiopia had the highest number of journalists in prison of any country in Africa, today there are none in jail. It is clear that the Ethiopian authorities are ambivalent about change, but both domestic and international encouragement can produce results.

Although some election support groups such as NDI, IRI and IFES have been expelled, the Carter Center and EU have been given permission to monitor the elections. Likewise, although restrictions have been placed on many domestic electoral observation efforts, others should still be allowed, including that of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council, which is receiving support from NED for electoral education and election monitoring. Yesterday the Ethiopian courts declared that all domestic groups should be allowed to observe the elections, and we are hopeful that NDI and IRI may still be able to carry out their programs to assist in party poll watching and civil society monitoring of the elections.

Most observers assume that the elections will be technically fine, and there will be little blatant fraud. The EPRDF government will easily hold on to power due to its strong control of rural areas. Nevertheless, if opposition parties succeed in capturing a significant number of seats in the new parliament, this would be a breakthrough. The introduction of alternative voices in the government could go a long way to defusing tensions among minority ethnic groups, addressing difficult policy issues, and opening up the political culture. In particular, the rights of the Oromo people, who make up nearly half the population, continue to be neglected, and could be an explosive problem if not addressed democratically.

If Ethiopia fails to conduct credible and fair elections, then it would represent another setback and a clear trend in the deterioration of African politics. The elections in Zimbabwe were manipulated beforehand by the government so that, although election day went smoothly, the results were almost certainly unfair. Likewise, the elections in Togo last week were held too quickly to allow the opposition parties to organize properly, and the disputed results have only increased that country's instability. Other forthcoming elections such as those in Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, Angola, Congo, and Burundi may be influenced by these developments. The AU and NEPAD's commitment to democracy and transparency will be sorely tested in the next year or so, and Ethiopia, as the seat of the AU, needs to set the right example.

But of course, democracy is more than elections. Ethiopia's progress will also depend on the steady expansion of freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, free markets, the rule of law, and all the other components of democracy. Democracy will also depend on fundamental changes in behavior and attitudes; in other words, equal rights and opportunities granted to all ethnic groups, the end of corrupt practices, the end of human rights abuses, and a willingness to stand up for one's rights and to fulfill one's duties as a citizen. This takes education and role models, both from the elite, and from the grassroots, bottom-up.

If Ethiopia presents some major political challenges, Eritrea is in an entirely different league. While Freedom House gives Ethiopia a "partly free" rating, Eritrea is unequivocally "not free." It ranks right along with Equatorial Guinea at the bottom of the list. The State Department's Human Rights Report is equally damning. There is no free press, virtually no independent NGOs, no opposition parties, nothing resembling democracy. It is one of the very few African countries that has never had an election. While much of the world supported its claims to independence and the idealism of its leaders, Eritrea is now perhaps the closest thing Africa has to an old-fashioned Stalinist system of government. Its aggressive behavior in the region is undoubtedly linked to the lack of freedom of its citizens, despite their understandable patriotism. Although the irredentist claims of certain Ethiopian groups are dangerous and wrong, this does not justify the continuing militarization of Eritrean society.

In recent years NED has failed to identify credible groups in Eritrea with programs to promote democracy or human rights. We are nevertheless hopeful that within the next few months we will be able to begin modest support for such programs. As one of Africa's "surviving dictatorships," Eritrea is exactly the kind of situation the Endowment focuses on in search whatever opportunities for expanding political space can be found. It is difficult to predict the outcome of such efforts, but despite Africa's political difficulties, Eritrea is currently out of step with the rest of the continent. It cannot remain an island of dictatorship for too long.

Honorable chairman and congressmen, thanks again for this opportunity. I am happy to answer any questions.